



Conference Ambassador Report by Mark de Hoop on:

Dialogue Session 463: Structural Conditions for transformative climate policy and climate friendly living. (19th of August 2020, 18.45-20.00)

Presenters: Verena Madner, Margeret Haderer, Klaus Kubeczko, Ernest Aigner and Andreas Novy

The presenters of this dialogue session introduce a research project that will assess the literature on transforming structural conditions to enable, secure and sustain modes of climate friendly living of all in Austria. This 2-year project chaired by Karl Steininger, Christoph Görg and Verena Madner will focus on three dimensions: power, (political) subjects and contemporary developments.

Getting stuck in experimentation?

Starting off, Haderer poses a provocative question toward the STRN community: “Is complexity thinking, and the focus on change through experiment, a way of prolonging the status quo? Because we are not deciding?” Novy points to a focus in the sustainability discourse on creating choice rather than making collective decisions. Doing so, the dominant narratives hamper collective decision-making for sustainability because they continue to portray sustainability as an outcome of individual consumer choice. The risk of getting stuck in experimentation is also highlighted by Timo Von Wirth and Jonas Torrens in full paper session 551 by raising the issue of “projectification”. I can relate to these observations from my work with municipalities. Often, municipalities prefer to seduce actors toward sustainability by creating options rather than to enforce alternative modes of living. Pilots seem a politically “safer” and “easier” option, whereas policy decisions on regulation and infrastructure are contentious and hard. Experimentation allows for mobilizing actors, testing alternatives and exploring trajectories in the face of uncertainties. When successful they may prepare the ground for collective decision-making. However, during this session it became more clear to me how experimentation risks being a gateway to temporally and depoliticized exploring options rather than adapting foundational infrastructures.

A theory to explain landscape?

Looking through the lense of power-theory, Novy posits that the narrative of choice neglects the structuring effect the landscape has on agency. He reasons that sustainability transition research requires theory to explain its landscape: the political economy of contemporary capitalism. In recent work on Transformative Social Innovation (TRANSIT) the absence of such theory is described as a

deliberate attempt to avoid assuming causal chains. The presenters however argue that such theory is prerequisite to understand how choice is structured and to inform decision-making. Sustainability transition studies has not paid sufficient attention to “social forms,” such as the growth imperative, and how these social forms are ingrained in our mode of development. This research uses political economy to assess how climate-friendly solutions may challenge this mode of development. Kubezko highlights that this will be done looking at recent events, for example finance and Covid-19 responses. In analyzing said solutions the presenters emphasize avoiding the localist trap. A combination of place-based infrastructural configurations for climate-friendly living, and organizing relationships and linkages between places is needed.

Collective Decision-Making as a prerequisite for structural change

The session made me reflect on how market thinking tends to imbue a sense of “neutrality” on the status quo. The configuration of our private and public space is seen as an outcome of fairly competing market forces. Co-evolving with societal practice. But neither the starting position nor the directionality of those market forces is neutral. Infrastructure is reproduced around a fossil intensive and consumption oriented lifestyle. Hence, changing societal practice in the face of multiple crises requires collective decision-making to change structural conditions. This research seems a promising avenue to inform such debates.

A central thrust in this presentation is a critique on the current political discourse because of its focus on creating options and its lack of decisions in the face of sustainability challenges. One of the questions that remains is posed at the end by Haas: Assuming we are lacking decisions in the face of sustainability challenges – then under what conditions can we get more decisions?